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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000048

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SUBJECT: SYRIA SUCCEEDS IN CONVOKING EMERGENCY AL SUMMIT,
HOPES TO BROKER BETTER DEAL FOR HAMAS

REF: A. DAMASCUS 32

[1](#)B. DAMASCUS 42

Classified By: CDA George Novinger, American Embassy Damascus, Reasons
1.4 b and d.

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Media sources in contact with Hamas representatives in Cairo and with the Syrian MFA told us late December 13 that "Hamas is done with talks in Cairo." Though Hamas leaders have not formally rejected further dialogue with EGIS director Omar Soleiman, today's headline of Syria's only privately-owned daily "al-Watan" reads, "The Resistance Rejects Egyptian Surrender and Defies Death." Syria and Qatar have apparently succeeded in obtaining the requisite 15-member state quorum to convoke an emergency Arab League Summit in Doha, now scheduled for January 16. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) Waddah abd al-Rabo (strictly protect), Editor-in-Chief of Syria's only privately-owned daily "al-Watan," told us late January 13 that Hamas would not cave on key demands for an end to the Israeli siege and opening border crossings as conditions for a renewed cease-fire. Abd al-Rabo reported he had spoken via telephone several times during the day with FM Muallim and Hamas leadership in Damascus about Hamas's decision to reject the Egyptian proposal. For now, however, Hamas had refrained from making a public statement to this effect.

[1](#)3. (C) Al-Rabo told us Syrian President Bashar al-Asad continued consultations with Turkey and Qatar on two fronts: (1) introducing Turkish mediation between Israel and Hamas; and (2) urging Arab countries to support an Arab League summit in Doha prior to the January 19-20 Arab Economic Forum in Kuwait. Abd al-Rabo thought it was important that Turkish PM Advisor Ahmet Davutoglu had returned again to Damascus January 13 for consultations with the SARG and Hamas. Abd al-Rabo claimed that he had heard from FM Muallim that 12 Arab countries had notified Arab League Secretary General Amre Moussa of their willingness to attend, and Bahrain and Morocco were voicing support but had not sent formal written notification. (Note: Bahrain and Morocco subsequently agreed to the emergency summit. The UAE, after an afternoon January 13 trip by the Emir of Dubai to Damascus, announced its support for the meeting. At 0945 local, al-Jazeera reported that the necessary 2/3 quorum had been achieved and that the emergency AL summit would occur January 16.)

[1](#)4. (C) Asked what Hamas would need in order to accept the Egyptian plan, Abd al-Rabo replied that Egypt had "played the role of Israel's representative rather than an honest

broker." Al Watan journalist Ziad Haidar (strictly protect), who has been in regular contact with the Hamas delegation in Cairo, told us that "Soleiman told Hamas, 'the Israeli government needs to be able to present a victory to the Knesset before it can stop the fighting.'" Hearing these words convinced Hamas that the Egyptian Government was acting in bad faith. Though Hamas agreed to return to Cairo after consultations in Damascus, "the decision had already been made to look for another mediator." Hamas did not want to be blamed for blocking agreement, Haidar added, and would probably not reject Egypt's proposal outright.

15. (C) Responding to arguments that Hamas's decision and Syrian efforts to create alternative diplomatic channels would only prolong the fighting, Abd al-Rabo said Hamas would not settle for a ceasefire if it did not come with recognition of its legitimacy. "Like Israel, Hamas needs something it can show the Palestinian people," he said. Abd al-Rabo added that Syria viewed its relationship with Hamas in very pragmatic terms. "The enemy of my enemy is useful so long as it doesn't threaten me," he explained. "This how the Syrian government views Iran, Hamas, and Hizballah."

16. (C) Syria, meanwhile, would not be content to allow Egypt to sell out the Palestinians so that Israel could perpetuate its control of the occupied territories. "Hamas and Syria view this as a regional issue and believe Arab public opinion is on their side," al-Rabo argued. Israel had blundered by invading and naively believing Hamas "would fold and disappear." The opposite was happening, Abd al-Rabo asserted. Even if Israel continued the fighting and killed

DAMASCUS 00000048 002 OF 002

thousands more Hamas loyalists, the Arab world would view Hamas as standing up to Israel. "All Hamas has to do is survive. Eventually the Israelis will stop, and when they do, millions of Arabs will claim Hamas as the victor," he said. "Yes," he acknowledged, "more Palestinians will die tragically." But the blame, he continued, "lies with Israel. No self-respecting Arab accepts Israel's claim that its destruction of Gaza is justified by intermittent rocket attacks." He added that, judging by large protests in major European capitals, many Westerners shared this view.

17. (C) Comment: Syria's primary objectives throughout the Gaza crisis have been to expand its regional influence at the expense of Egypt and Saudi Arabia and to assert Hamas's legitimacy. It is noteworthy that Abd al-Rabo, a media-savvy Syrian who operates in close coordination with the Syrian government, freely admits that Syrian diplomacy aims to exploit regional and world public opinion to counter Israel's military superiority. We suspect Bashar will work with Qatar, Algeria, Libya, and others to adopt Hamas's demands (refs A and B) as the position of Arab leaders attending the January 16 summit.

NOVINGER